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ABSTRACT

This paper states that the language called "Ebonics" is believed to be over 300 years old and that a great deal of the language was created while Black slaves were being brought from Africa to the Americas. Noting that in January of this year the Linguistic Society of America recognized Ebonics as an official language with just as much credibility as English, the paper contends that Ebonics, however, seems to have met with more adversaries than supporters. The paper also contends that, while students should not be told that they can never speak Ebonics, they need to realize that it is not acceptable in many situations. The paper also states that the Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, announced that the federal government would not recognize Ebonics as a language nor would school programs advocating its use receive any federal funding from Washington. The paper points out that even though a good portion of the American population speaks Spanish, Spanish will never be fully assimilated or accepted into mainstream culture and concludes that Ebonics will probably meet the same fate. (Contains 9 references.) (CR)

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Ebonics and a Creative Society

Kevin Molesworth

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In Australia you might hear, "me jumpers on front to back" and not know that that means, "my sweater is on backwards." In London, a man might say, "I needed a fag after queuing for the lieu," which means that he was craving a cigarette after waiting in line for the bathroom for a long time. In Chicago you must have a lot of money for a special kind of hamburger if someone tells you that, "you need fat cake for those sliders." Following the lingo of the pop/drug culture, a person going to the "horse's stable" is going to meet a heroin dealer. Closer to home, a person living in Rochester looking for, "a hot and a pop," wants a hot dog and a soda. And if you are in an urban area and you hear an African-American male say, "Yo G, wanna come back to my crib and hit the skins?" you are listening to him proposition a female for sexual activity at his house.

Without relying on my translations of these quotations, how many did you understand? The first five statements are considered slang but some refer to the last by any number of names such as Black Talk, African-American English, AAE, Black/African Language, Urban Colloquialism, Black Vernacular, Black/African American Lingo, or Ebonics. The remainder of this paper will focus not on slang but on the controversial issue of Ebonics.

In order to achieve a better understanding of Ebonics we must first go over some history and the "rules" of the language. It is believed that the language is over three hundred years old and displays a variety of influences from the Western Coast of Africa, The West Indies, and Creole languages. Further speculation assumes that a great deal of the language was created while slaves were being brought to the Americas. The captains of the sea-going vessels never put blacks of the same tribe together because they did not want them to communicate. Because of this, the slaves had to invent a way to understand each other and some of the vocal characteristics

inherent in their new language remain in the Ebonics of today. Of course, since there was no documentation of any of this, these are just theories.

Now, we must move on the the patterns of grammar and pronunciation of Ebonics as explained by Geneva Smitherman in her "Word from the African Community" essay. In order to limit confusion I shall write this like a list.

The "R" sound at the end of a word and after a vowel is dropped.

"summer" becomes "summah"

"whore" becomes "ho"

"sure, you're right" becomes "show you right"

Words that end in a consonant are changed to a vowel sound.

"cold" becomes "coal"

"torn" becomes "toe"

Stress, or emphasis, is placed on the first syllable of many words.

"Detroit" becomes "DE-troit"

"Police" becomes "PO-lice"

The "I" vowel sound in words like "think" or "ring" is changed to an "A."

"think" becomes "thank"

"ring" becomes "rang"

"drink" becomes "drank"

Words beginning with a "TH" are changed to a "D."

"this" becomes "dis"

"that" becomes "dat"

Words that end with a "TH" are changed to "T" or an "F."

"death" becomes "def"

"with" becomes "wit"

These next three rules are a bit more confusing. The first of these states that time, or tense, is indicated by context and not with an "S" or an "ED." Instead of saying, "he does anything he wants" they would say, "he do anythang he want." The next rule shows that the word "is" is often replaced by "be." Thus, "it is that way" becomes "it be dat way." The last rule states that the word "is" is sometimes dropped entirely. This allows, "what's up" to become, "what up."

Now that we have gone through the grueling process of reviewing the rules the question that often arises concerning whether or not this is a real language. The answer is yes. In January of this year the Linguistic Society of America recognized it as an official language with just as much credibility as English. This action opens the door to wealth of questions and controversy.

Since Ebonics seems to have met with more adversaries than supporters I will discuss some of the arguments against its use. Regardless of what any Linguistic experts say, the fact remains that many people view Ebonics as a form of broken English spoken by lazy people. Whether that is true or not is almost irrelevant. What is relevant is that I do not envision a day when Ebonics, in spoken or written form, will ever be accepted, or assimilated, into our lives without prejudice. Let us all take a look at socio-economics for a moment. How many chief executive officers of "Fortune 500" companies speak Ebonics? How many of these companies, do you think, hire candidates that speak Ebonics for middle or upper-level positions? I think we can safely assume that none of them do. Let us also imagine a scenario where two prospective employees are interviewing for a job at Wal-Mart, making minimum wage as a cashier. They both have similar experience, similar education, both are African-American, and both of them perform equally well in the oral interview, except one of them speaks perfect English and the other responds to questions in Ebonics. Who do

you think is going to get the job? The point I am trying to make here is that certain things will never be accepted in the business community. It's not just Ebonics. A man who walks into an interview for IBM with long hair, a beard, and earrings is not going to get a job either. So, if we can eliminate barriers for ourself than we should do that. As teachers, it is our responsibility to create functional adults who can succeed in our society if they take advantage of opportunities. Letting a student graduate high school that cannot speak proper English is almost as bad as graduating an illiterate student. I am not saying that students should not be allowed to speak Ebonics ever, but they need to realize that it is not acceptable in many situations. This idea is not all that outrageous because we edit ourselves all the time dependent on our circumstance. They way I speak to my male friends in a gym locker room is very different from the way I speak to my grandmother. Again, the keyword is "community." Your friends can be a community and your church might be as well, but the languages that are accepted within those communities is very different.

When the Oakland Unified School District adopted Ebonics into its curriculum it was bombarded with many harsh criticisms. Poet and writer Maya Angelou and former Governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, publicly denounced the schools decision and U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, announced that the federal government would not recognize Ebonics as a language nor would school programs advocating its use receive any funding from Washington D.C. With this decision by the Oakland Schools came two major concerns. One of these deals with money. The Oakland School Board allotted 4.8 million dollars for there program which would educate the teachers as to the rules of grammar and pronunciation found within Ebonics. Many people questioned why so much money was needed for this task. After all, I just gave you a list of most of the rules and that did not cost you anything. Not only that, but we

are dealing with a school district that does not even have text books for all their students or suitable desks for them to sit in. Whether you are a supporter of Ebonics or not, it is undeniable that the money could have been delegated for things which require more immediate attention.

The second issue that concerned people was the credibility factor. If we allow our students to speak Ebonics, do we accept papers written in Ebonics? Do you give the same grade to two students who complete a creative writing assignment by relatively equal standards, except one is written in standard English and the other in Ebonics? If you do not account for the difference than how can we ever take off points for poor grammar, spelling, or wording? Now that we allow these students to use Ebonics, what happens to them when they go to a college wear it is not accepted? The questions could go on forever, but your beginning to see the big picture.

Whether or not you agree with any of the arguments presented in this paper you will have to admit one thing; our country does not deal well with change and is very slow to accept new ideas. Although we claim to celebrate diversity in this country, we are in fact, in love with sameness. Immigrants that come to this country with a thick accent or a poor working knowledge of English are ostracized and that is just what is happening to African-Americans who speak Ebonics in this country as well. If Ebonics was used solely as a tool to facilitate the learning of standard English, I believe, that fewer people would have a problem with it, but when you start talking about 4.8 million dollars and it being an LSA official language, people get a little tense. If you recall some years back, a group of lobbyists wanted to make Spanish our official second language and we all know what happened to that idea. Even though a good portion of our population speaks Spanish it will never be fully assimilated, or accepted, into our mainstream culture. I believe that Ebonics will meet this same fate.

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